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AUTHOR Coballes-Vega, Carmen
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ABSTRACT

Recent projections estimate that minorities, including African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians, will comprise one-third of the U.S. population. Currently, the majority of prospective teachers are White females, a situation which stands in sharp contrast to the backgrounds of the students they will teach. This digest examines considerations within preservice teacher education programs to address this challenge. Researchers have recommended that the following be included in the teacher education curriculum: (1) at least one course in multicultural education that takes into consideration the needs of all students; (2) information about the history and culture of students from a wide range of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds; (3) integration of content about the contributions made by various groups; (4) information about first and second language acquisition and effective teaching practices for working with students from limited English proficient backgrounds; and (5) field experiences and student teaching opportunities with students from varying backgrounds. (LL)

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by

Carmen Coballes-Vega

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Considerations in Teaching Culturally Diverse Children

Carmen Coballes-Vega

Recent projections (Griffith, Frase, & Ralph, 1989) have estimated that minorities in the United States will comprise one-third of the population; in some metropolitan areas African Americans and Hispanics will constitute a majority of the school-age population. In other communities, there are concentrations of school-age children from both Native American and Asian backgrounds with growing numbers of immigrants and refugees from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean (First, 1988). Currently, the majority of prospective teachers are White females (American, 1990), which stands in sharp contrast to the backgrounds of the students they will teach. This digest examines considerations within preservice teacher education programs to address this challenge.

Background

There has been growing concern about how best to meet the educational challenge of learner diversity. Some researchers (National, 1991) have raised questions about the efficacy of teacher education programs which attempt to deal with learner diversity and which explore changes in prospective teachers' roles in modifying instruction. However, other researchers (i.e., Banks & Banks, 1989; Bennett, 1990; Sleeter & Grant, 1988) have recommended that the following be included within the teacher education curriculum:

- at least one course in multicultural education that takes into consideration the needs of all students;
- information about the history and culture of students from a wide number of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds;
- content about the contributions made by various groups;
- information about first- and second-language acquisition and effective teaching practices for working with students from limited English proficient (LEP) backgrounds; and
- field experiences and student teaching opportunities with students from varying backgrounds.

Courses in Multicultural Education

Currently there are multicultural education courses across the United States which are used in teacher preparation programs. The issues raised with respect to educational equality, equity, and social justice within a historical, legal, and sociopolitical context are central to the content. For many prospective teachers, the information provided in these courses is new and has not been discussed in general education courses or in preservice education courses. This background is important for the teacher to have in order to understand the rights and responsibilities of students as well as of teachers and parents. While having this information may not eliminate the stereotypes or misconceptions that teachers have about groups, it can serve to inform more directly future instructional decisions which they will make. For example, while it may not eliminate some gender beliefs, being aware of the attitudes and perceptions a teacher has about girls and boys and mathematics may diminish sex-segregated groups within the class during math activities.

Information About History and Culture

Information provided on the history and culture of future students can be a valuable resource for the prospective teacher when making decisions about students, adapting pedagogy, and involving parents. Successful models of open communication between diverse teachers, students, parents, other school personnel, and community liaisons can also be incorporated into teacher education courses.

Many African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans have had educational experiences where they suffered as a result of negative social, economic, and educational policies (Banks & Banks, 1989). Practices such as referral of these students in disproportionate numbers to special education classes continue even today. With additional information, teachers may be able to ask further questions or request technical assistance in providing appropriate instruction before a referral is considered.

Some researchers (Bennett, 1990; First, 1988) have focused on the miscues which occur between teachers and students based on misinterpretations and generalizations made about cultural background. Student behaviors such as attention-getting strategies, ways of responding to questions, and ways of interacting are examples of actions which are influenced by cultural background. For some African American, Native American, and Hispanic students, cooperative grouping instructional activities may be better because they parallel the context for learning found in their cultures. Teachers can consider modifying traditional direct instruction to include other types of instruction from which all students can benefit.

Another classroom factor to be considered is the extent to which the literacy tradition of the home and culture closely resembles that of the school. If there is a strong emphasis in the culture on the oral tradition, then knowledge may be transmitted through "verbal usage and memorization" as in the cases of Moroccan and Western Samoan cultures (Field & Aebersold, 1990). This is different from the highly literate tradition in the United States and presents problems if the teacher expects certain types of classroom interaction based on reading text.

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The cultural values transmitted by parents can be markedly different from those the children encounter in the schools. For example, among some Southeast Asian parents the individual's role within the family is of primary importance; personal desires are secondary (Morrow, 1989). Thus, for these students a decision to care for younger siblings while parents work might come before a decision to complete a school assignment. Understanding child-rearing practices, family relationships, and interpersonal communication is critical in understanding parents. Communication can be increased by using the home language for conferences and providing written notices in both languages for those parents who have difficulty with English. Community liaisons, aides, translators, or volunteers who are bilingual can assist in this area. The teacher can solicit more participation and cooperation from parents if the message is communicated appropriately.

Integration of Contributions

Modeling the integration of content about the contributions of various groups is vital for prospective teachers because it can demonstrate effective ways of using this information within the classroom. For many students this may be the first opportunity they have had to be exposed to others' national heroes, heroines, events, notable contributions, and theories.

Language Background

In working with students from varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds, prospective teachers must recognize that many will come from diverse language backgrounds. While there may be a group which can generally be described as "Southeast Asian," these students come from different countries and also speak different languages.

The incorporation of information about first- and second-language acquisition and effective teaching practices for working with students from LEP backgrounds is critical for teacher planning. Information about the language strengths and needs of students will be helpful for working with special personnel such as bilingual teachers and English as a second language teachers.

Knowledge about the student's use of both languages can assist the teacher in the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills activities. The teacher may know that one student has contact with English-speaking peers outside of school and also reads material in English at home. Another student may socialize primarily with students from his/her own language background and read materials at home in the native language. This information can be helpful to the teacher in setting up homework assignments as well as in-class interactions with other students (Hudson & Fradd, 1990; Cheng, 1987).

Field Experiences

There is a need for field experiences and student teaching opportunities to work with diverse students. Prospective teachers can benefit from interacting with these students before they enter the field and while they are still able to dialogue with teacher educators and teachers in the field. It can be a time to design instructional activities which can be applied within a variety of contexts and with different learners. With changes in school populations projected within this decade, it is important for prospective teachers to also have contact with the populations which they will ultimately serve.

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References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; documents (ED) are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 700 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service: 1-800-443-ERIC. For more information contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 293-2450.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education
Mary E. Dilworth, Director
Judy A. Beck, Associate Director
Carmen Coballes-Vega, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

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